

CHINESE ARTISTS AND CONTEMPORARY ART
UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF
TIANANMEN SQUARE EVENT OF JUNE, 1989

BY CHENYU WANG

**CHINESE ARTISTS AND CONTEMPORARY ART
UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF
TIANANMEN SQUARE EVENT OF JUNE, 1989**

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DEDICATIONS

Dedicated to Bojin Zhou for your undying support and love

AND

Dedicated to all the people who supported and helped me, who inspired and guided me
and who shared your stories and opinions with me

AND

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Abstract

In the year of 1989, the appalling Tiananmen Square Event happened in China, becoming a large topic of social and political research. This period became the most transformative, changing modern Chinese society, and thus Chinese art. This watershed event not only changed the social ideology of China, but also had a big influence to Chinese contemporary art history. Especially in the same year, before the event, China/Avant-garde exhibition supported by the government was held.

From studying this theme, the main purpose of the thesis is to explore the relations between individuals and history, art and politics, and people's own identity. The paper's objective is to alleviate some misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Chinese contemporary artists and artworks. To achieve the purpose, this article will discuss the backgrounds for contemporary Chinese art: Chinese history, Chinese art history, and Chinese cultural context, along with several political events. After which, details of the interviews of four art-related workers who directly or indirectly participated in the Tiananmen Square Event, bringing a unique insight whether politics largely influences their artworks consciously or potentially.

In brief, after the Tiananmen Square Event of June 1989, the art environment in China changed enormously. Consequently, the year of 1989 is of significance to study the history of contemporary Chinese art.

Introduction

Modern China, officially the People's Republic of China (PRC) established in the year of 1949, is governed by the Communist Party of China. In recent years, the world has witnessed the dramatic economic development of this country which has become the second largest economy by nominal GDP, and sustaining its GDP growth rate at nearly 10%¹ for over ten years. As a reaction to this astonishing development, there is stronger interest worldwide to understand all aspects of the country. Noticeably, modern and contemporary Chinese art has become a hot topic in the 21st century. The art market is increasingly willing to deepen the understanding of modern and contemporary Chinese art. Specifically, in 2013, the Metropolitan Museum in New York City held its first major exhibition of contemporary Chinese art, Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China. It presented both old, permanent Chinese collections and works by new contemporary artists. Concurrently, Chinese artists are exploring the mainstream works of Chinese art and engaging in countless artistic events and exhibitions - small and large, scholarly and commercially. Most of them endeavor to re-examine the not-so-distant Socialist Realist past, referencing ancient philosophy, revisiting the conventional mediums of Chinese art, and reflecting on relevant issues in the country's rapidly changing environment.

The past is showing as the focus for recent exhibitions of Chinese art, as if seemingly trying to reveal ownership over the future. This year, the Guggenheim Museum just

¹ "GDP growth (annual %)." GDP growth (annual %) | Data. Accessed February 16, 2017.
<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CN>

opened the exhibition, Tales of Our Time, with the emphasis on often-overlooked historical and cultural Chinese narratives. With the expansion of globalization and international exchanges, the country's nonprofit systems are growing and there are numerous private museums being established, welcoming artworks to be exhibited from all around the world.

Meanwhile, Chinese collectors are now keen in breaking the auction records for both Chinese and Western art masterpieces. Last year, a Chinese billionaire bought Modigliani painting, resulting in a record breaking \$170 million². Although it was said the flailing Chinese economy caused the slowing of Asian buying, there were reports of "very strong" bidding from American and European clients and from Asian clients³. Despite the prosperous art world pouring over contemporary Chinese art, there are inevitably some misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

Inundated in the fast consumerism world, Chinese artworks' value may easily be biased by the artists' country, sex or personal identity. When it comes to the gallery-oriented contemporary Chinese art, paintings with clear symbols or political issues of China, such as Mao or Tibetan Independence, sell better than other themes. This is in part because of the clear signs easily exhibiting the artwork's exoticness differences from

² Ellis-Petersen, Hannah. "Modigliani painting sells to Chinese billionaire for record breaking \$170m." The Guardian. November 10, 2015. Accessed February 16, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/10/modigliani-painting-reclining-nude-chinese-billionaire>.

³Martinez, Alanna. "\$57M Basquiat Breaks Auction Record at Christie's." Observer. May 17, 2016. Accessed February 16, 2017. <http://observer.com/2016/05/57m-basquiat-breaks-auction-record-at-christies/>.

the West. The bias influencing the buyers' purchasing preferences demonstrates their desire for typical oriental styles, and lack thereof for abstract artworks created by Chinese artists following a more Western style. In Art in America's July 2001 issue, the article assertively criticized that contemporary Chinese artists have "the urge for practitioners to 'catch up' with the West and to stand out from the overwhelming competition which leads many to a strategy of shock", and are "obsessed with testing the limits of tolerance." Without understanding the real cultural context of both old and modern social structure in China, these unkind judgments on contemporary Chinese artists will not stop.

The corresponding reasons for this judgment varies greatly. From the historic perspective, modern China has experienced political, economic, and cultural calamities, and then transformed disturbingly under the influence of complicated factors. It is hard to demonstrate contemporary Chinese art simply because art-oriented ideas and reflections are conflicting. In addition, because of the peculiar nature of the previous feudal empire and its long duration, it is still difficult for Westerners to even truly understand "where" or "what happened" when contemporary Chinese art is considered. Moreover, due to the different or opposite political ideologies between China and the West, Chinese modern art is often introduced with different perceptions and ideas in a brief, fragmented, and arbitrary manner. As Ai Weiwei mentioned in his blog, though Western standards tend to absolutely dictate hypocritical and sanctimonious actions, art following the Western standard boasts political correctness, tries to deal with small and

big affairs, and simplifies the way of addressing politics and ideology.⁴ Globalization, in fact, has not eliminated the difference between China and the West in terms of their art history, art development, culture and ideology, as well as the relations between art and policies.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore the relations between individuals and history, art and politics, and people's own identity. To achieve this purpose, this article will discuss the backgrounds for contemporary Chinese art: Chinese history, Chinese art history and Chinese cultural context, along with several political events. Particularly, this article describes these backgrounds from the same perspective as the upcoming Guggenheim Museum exhibition, *Art and China after 1989: Theatre of the World*. It especially mentions the occurrence of the Tiananmen Square Event in 1989, which was followed by the opening of the pioneering art exhibition in the National Gallery, Beijing, in the same year. 1989 has been considered a milestone for Chinese history, world history, and Chinese art history. Following these events, China chose to develop and maintain its own unique and independent ideology from the world, thus creating the country's most transformative period, changing modern Chinese society, and thus Chinese art.

⁴ Chinese Contemporary Art in Dilemma and Transition: POSTED ON FEBRUARY 4, 2006, <http://archive.neural.it/init/default/show/1586>

Purpose/Problem Statement

The analysis on this topic was chosen for the following reason: Nowadays, modern artworks from Chinese artists with some political symbols are usually more familiar to the audience; especially in the U.S art market. It should be noted that Mao and Tiananmen are two major symbols of Political Pop for China, as explained in more detail in the Background Section. However, people both in the U.S. and China know little about what really happened in modern China, which has enjoyed such a dramatic developing speed.

One of the events that cannot be ignored is the Tiananmen Square Event of 1989, which was believed to be a big chance for China to convert into a democratic society, though it eventually failed. After this event, many Chinese artists immigrated to the U.S. and other countries. With the passage of almost 30 years, it would be academically significant to know these artists' current life situations, their theme of arts, and what they have done to reflect on the event with an objective distance. Therefore, it is beneficial to understand the power of politics in the art field and to appreciate modern Chinese artworks from a different perspective.

There are some potential limitations in this study. At first, due to the censorship in China, it is hard to get completely correct data like the exact number of deaths from the event, and the number of students and artists who immigrated after the event. Secondly, there is no official documentary file available to figure out the truth of the Tiananmen Square Event. Thirdly, there is even less information concerning the relation

between art and politics despite significant research about the Tiananmen Square Event. Fourthly, sources obtained mostly from interviews with a small number of samples might lead to a subjective conclusion. In spite of these, this study aims to bring a unique insight based on artists' opinions about the political event, and to reveal whether politics largely influences their artworks consciously or potentially.

The hypothesis of this research is that politics has indeed largely influenced artworks by the Chinese artists that were interviewed in this study, and changed their entire life. However, it is not a truth that artists living in the U.S. have better artistic performance than their counterparts in China who are under more censorship and limitations. Possibly, some artists might insist that politics has no influence on their art. In this sense, the final conclusion is unpredictable. This article deals with the topic of modern and contemporary Chinese art under the influence of the Tiananmen Square Event of 1989, to figure out how politics has modified or affected art and the artists' physical and mental life, and to explore individual identity in this specific cultural context. This research is supposed to help others understand more about modern and contemporary Chinese art from a different perspective, and to resolve some misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Chinese art.

Methodology

The information about this thesis comes mostly from numerous academic sources. Information in the history part and the brief demography part comes from various academic papers. In addition, the environment of current art in China is also acquired from academic articles. Apart from second-hand materials, first-hand data has been collected through interviewing artists with diversified backgrounds and personal experience in the event.

Qualified interviews are of importance to understand Chinese artists' real opinions about the influence of the Tiananmen Square Event of 1989 to on art. This article interviewed four art-related workers who directly or indirectly participated in the Tiananmen Square Event. They were interviewed in face-to-face conversations, video calls and emails in different cities of China and the U.S. in 2016. Additional information and feedback was also given after the interviews. Their different backgrounds, stories and opinions over the Event and art would be helpful for readers to deepen their understanding of modern and contemporary Chinese art, its cultural context and social structure, as well as the relations among them. Their art works are not limited into Political Pop art, which might imply that there are other "invisible" factors under political influence.

Literature Review

The Tiananmen Square Event of 1989 is known as a student-led democracy movement in Beijing, China, happening during May and June of that year. It was eventually repressed by the Chinese government on June 4th (reported as the June Fourth Incident 六四事件). Subsequently, the efforts to change China into a democratic society became a failure. Research on the theme mostly focuses on the political influence of these events. On the other hand, the year of 1989 was also a watershed for contemporary Chinese art. According to Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei⁵, prior to 1989 when protests occurred at Tiananmen Square, China actually had a year of artistic advances. China's avant-garde visual artists who received Western arts styles gathered and exhibited their works. And John Clark⁶ also mentioned the opening of "The Stars" exhibition in the late 1980s, commenting that it "at least has its context provided, if not the conditions for its basic etiology set, by the political and economic pressures which built up on the Chinese political system from the late 1970s to the Beijing massacre of June 4, 1989". Undoubtedly, political events affect contemporary Chinese art in potential or invisible ways.

The Cultural Revolution is another big tragedy happening in China from 1966 to 1976. Art also played an important role in such a political environment. The goal of the

⁵ Sorgenfrei, Carol Fisher. 1991. "Orientalizing the Self: Theatre in China After Tiananmen Square". TDR (1988-) 35 (4). The MIT Press: 169–85. doi:10.2307/1146171.

⁶ Clark, John. 1992. "Official Reactions to Modern Art in China Since the Beijing Massacre". Pacific Affairs 65 (3). Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia: 334–52. doi:10.2307/2760067

Cultural Revolution, formally known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was to preserve “true” Communist ideology in the country by purging remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society, and to re-impose Maoist thought as the dominant ideology within the Party. Yang, Guey-Meei and Tom Suchan⁷ have discussed three modern Chinese Artworks after 1949 under the influence of the Cultural Revolution, aiming to understand how visual imagery communicates and produces an impact on contemporary society, and also how historical events and shared experiences shape contemporary identity. One of their findings is that because of the control over art as propaganda, “art should combine realism with romanticism in the style of Soviet Socialist Realist art”. They also explored how arts worked under that period. Finally, they concluded that by examining the content, form, and context, one is able to understand the complex dynamics between an artist’s message and artistic choices, in relation to the artist’s socio-cultural context. Thereby, in the market of contemporary Chinese art, political factors or implications are a big part.

There are several expression ways for contemporary Chinese art to discuss politics. One of the main factors is the use of Mao’s portrait. Mao, best known in the West because of its prominent position as the frontispiece of the Little Red Book and through Andy Warhol’s remaking of the 1970s, may be the single most frequently reproduced portrait in human history. Lago⁸ discussed the phenomenon of Mao-craze with the

⁷ YANG, GUEY-MEEI, and TOM SUCHAN. 2009. “The Cultural Revolution and Contemporary Chinese Art”. *Art Education* 62 (6). National Art Education Association: 25–32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20694799>.

⁸ Lago, Francesca Dal. 1999. “Personal Mao: Reshaping an Icon in Contemporary Chinese Art”. *Art Journal* 58 (2). [Taylor & Francis, Ltd., College Art Association]: 47–59. doi:10.2307/777948.

1990s economic liberalization in China, discovering that artists would use Mao as a symbol for the acknowledgement of political reality and even to satirize the current reality. As concluded by the author, “The Chinese case offers a direct example of the versatility of the propagandistic medium to fulfil opposite ideological orientations within the same society and within the time frame of one generation.” The article “Reframing Mao”⁹ also talks about the relationship between the use of Mao’s imagery and modern Chinese art. It mainly discusses the Tiananmen event and how avant-garde artists regard Mao’s portrait. As revealed, the predominant concern of recent avant-garde Chinese artists is not Mao himself in any direct sense, but rather the pre-existing, mass-reproduced, rhetorically loaded images of him. The author summarized that albeit for consciously and innovatively political purposes, conventional ritual functions of Chinese portrait have been invoked, while pre-existing cultural patterns of response mobilized.

In addition, Tiananmen Square, the place where the protests happened, is another symbol of the combination between politics and art. Haiyan Lee explored the design, function, and aesthetic way of Tiananmen Square from a unique perspective. In “The Charisma of Power and the Military Sublime in Tiananmen Square”¹⁰, the author focused on the dissection of power through symbols, rituals, and mythologies that lend enduring legitimacy to the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist revolution it led.

⁹ “Reframing Mao: Aspects of Recent Chinese Art, Popular Culture and Politics”. 1996. “Reframing Mao: Aspects of Recent Chinese Art, Popular Culture and Politics”. In *Art and Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective*, 236–49. Hong Kong University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jc2q8.38>.

¹⁰ LEE, HAIYAN. 2011. “The Charisma of Power and the Military Sublime in Tiananmen Square”. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70 (2). [Cambridge University Press, Association for Asian Studies]: 397–424. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41302312>.

This article examines how the official iconography of Tiananmen Square constructs the charisma of power through what the author called the “military sublime.” As the author stated, “politics became a form of sublime art” and “the symbolism of death and resurrection, the commitment to the nation, the mysticism of blood and sacrifice, the cult of heroes and martyrs, the ‘communion’ of camaraderie, all contributed to the spreading of the myth amongst soldiers that politics was a total experience which had to renew all forms of existence.” Here, the dominant mode of symbolic investment of space does not only constitute the nation as a militarized political body, but also frames the tradition of dissent associated with the Square, most notable in the 1989 protest movement.

After understanding the two main symbols in Chinese Political Pop Art, we cannot say that they are the whole content of the contemporary Chinese art world. Chinese artists reflect and get inspiration from the past and also observe the modern world. One strategy is skipping the political and chaotic time in the 20th century of China but looking back on the ancient past “for making sense of an increasingly complex present,” as Chen Shuxia¹¹ mentioned. In the book *Shared Destiny*, relevant arts exhibitions opened in China in 2014, seeking for a context for modern Chinese art. What is more, after Met’s first major exhibition of the late 19th and 20th century Chinese Art: Modern Expression, Ralph Croizier¹² discussed that the collection is restricted to works in ink, thus omitting Western-derived forms such as oils, watercolors, printmaking, and

¹¹ Chen Shuxia. 2015. “LOOKING BACKWARD: CHINESE ART IN 2014”. In *Shared Destiny*, edited by Geremie R Barmé, Linda Jaivin, and Jeremy Goldkorn, 194–99. ANU Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt19893k8.25>.

¹² Croizier, Ralph. 2003. Review of *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62 (2). [Cambridge University Press, Association for Asian Studies]: 588–91. doi:10.2307/3096270.

photography. Neither the collection nor this symposium shows the total picture of modern Chinese art. Chinese modernity is still not understood by the West.

Even for Chinese artists and their art market, according to the conversation among three Ai Weiwei, Uli Sigg and Yung Ho Chang, they hold a different opinion about the new ideology or cultural context in China nowadays. The book *Art and Cultural Policy in China*¹³ is concentrated on the backgrounds and effects of such a rapid change, and the relationship between art and architecture to politics and Media. Those artists embody a new generation of creative people in China, who have their artistic roots both on their homeland and abroad. From the book, we know several points about China's cultural movements which stands in a lively exchange with the global art world.

From the official reaction of the government after the Tiananmen Event, it concluded that the art the government needs is a socialist modern art with Chinese characteristics. We could see that dilemma exists between the government's support and Chinese artists' conditions.¹⁴ We know that the official ideological objection to modern art is of formal, intellectual, ideological, political and ethnic impurity. In addition, Clark¹⁵ thought that there are three types of pressure applied against modern art and discussed the consequences of modern art. From the perspective of some artists like Ai Weiwei, the

¹³ Ai, Weiwei, Uli Sigg, Yonghe Zhang, and Peter Pakesch. *Art And Cultural Policy in China: a Conversation between Ai Weiwei, Uli Sigg and Yung Ho Chang*. Wien: Springer, 2009.

¹⁴ Clark, John. 1992. "Official Reactions to Modern Art in China Since the Beijing Massacre". *Pacific Affairs* 65 (3). Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia: 334–52. doi:10.2307/2760067

¹⁵ As 14

confusion and dilemma for arts creation come widely from more reasons. In his Blog, Ai Weiwei¹⁶ argued that modern Chinese artists' dilemma comes from political and historical reasons full of confusion and identity problems. The reasons generally derive from the lack of foundation, the cultivation for arts freedom, the West's misinterpretation and the combination between modern and ancient China. On the other hand, due to the peculiar nature of this feudal empire and its long-term isolation, it is still hard for Westerners to gain a true understanding of contemporary Chinese art—even at the most basic level of understanding “where,” or “what happened.”

However, visual art is one form throughout the art world. As suggested by Hao Huang¹⁷, with the help of another specific art form of rock music in China, we can still positively assume that the single focus on the student-led democracy movement of the late 1980s has splintered into a multiplicity of artistic styles, artistic ambitions, and characteristics of art form in the new millennium, and it continues to be implicated in the on-going negotiation of identity by youth in the PRC and throughout the Chinese diaspora worldwide. Besides, Ralph Croizier¹⁸ concluded that although the event of June 1989 still casts a shadow over various fields of research on contemporary China, it seems

¹⁶ ABRAHAMSEN, ERIC. 2011. “Chinese Contemporary Art in Dilemma and Transition: POSTED ON FEBRUARY 4, 2006”. In Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009, edited by LEE AMBROZY, 14–18. MIT Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhg38.9>.

¹⁷ Huang, Hao. "Voices from Chinese Rock, Past and Present Tense: Social Commentary and Construction of Identity in Yaogun Yinyue , from Tiananmen to the Present." *Popular Music and Society* 26, no. 2 (June 2003): 183-202. doi:10.1080/0300776032000095512.

¹⁸ Croizier, Ralph. 1990. “Art and Society in Modern China--a Review Article”. Review of *The New Chinese Painting, 1949-1986.; Later Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, 1800-1950.; Twentieth-century Chinese Painting.; the Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China.; A General History of Chinese Art: Modern and Contemporary Art.; Beyond the Open Door: Contemporary Paintings from the People's Republic of China.; A History of Contemporary Chinese Paintings..* *The Journal of Asian Studies* 49 (3). [Cambridge University Press, Association for Asian Studies]: 579–602. doi:10.2307/2057772

that the momentum generated in the eighties will carry forward the serious study of modern Chinese art and society. Difficulties of access remain, but related materials are available in Chinese publications, art collections, and artists' memories on a scale almost unimaginable only ten years ago. Moreover, some big questions remain largely unanswered, especially the questions about the survival and development of the world's oldest painting tradition, about East-West cultural conflict and synthesis, as well as about art and revolutionary change. There are still promising prospects for cooperation and fruitful exchanges between Chinese and foreign scholars. Prospects for similar exchanges between art historians and non-art historians should improve. As a once dominant authority in Chinese art criticism (and everything else) said in another context, "the future is bright".¹⁹

¹⁹ Vogel, Ezra F. "The Tiananmen Tragedy, : May 17–June 4, 1989". 2011. "The Tiananmen Tragedy, : May 17–June 4, 1989". In Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China, 616–39. Harvard University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbw2f.27>.

Looking Backward

Background Discussion

To fully understand the interviewees' ideas and opinions, and to understand Chinese cultural context and ideology, several backgrounds should be taken into consideration:

HISTORY:

Brief Chinese History

There is almost no country in the world more complicated than China in terms of its history and nature. As one of the six ancient civilizations, China still depends on the unchanged nationality, Han, along with multiple minority groups. The history of ancient China can be traced back to over 4,000 to 5,000 years ago. For more than 2000 years, China was ruled by dynasties and dominated by powerful families throughout its history. Emperors continued to rule over China from the Shang dynasty (c.1600-1046 BCE) to the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). Besides, foreign nations or outsider cultures have also conquered and ruled China several times. However, China has absorbed some features of these invading nations during the massive cultural and political upheavals, and then integrated these features into its new cultural modes. In the process which has vexed the development of Chinese culture and history, these different values resolve and integrate into one after coexisting with and complementing each other for a long time.

It can be said that ancient China was a glorious and prosperous civilization. The glory history of ancient China left Chinese people invisible or subconscious prides. However, in the 1800s, there was almost another story about China's modern history, full of humiliation and trauma, along with numerous conflicts, chaos, riots, and wars.²⁰ The geographic and technological limitations had once kept China fairly isolated from the rest of the world. With the Industrial Revolution sweeping Europe and America, an international military coalition called the Eight-Nation Alliance (they are Japan, Russia, Italy, Britain, the U.S., Germany, France, and Austria-Hungary) set out to invade China for Chinese goods.²¹ Although there were also a lot of inner wars in the period of ancient China, the main difference is that in modern China's history, all the wars were by launched the West. At that time, Western military power was far superior to that of China, and China was defeated in a series of military confrontations and forced to sign "unequal treaties" that opened Chinese ports in 1842. Consequently, China became a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society for around one hundred years. And then World War II and the Civil War came, bringing further destruction which increasingly left Chinese people ineffaceable mark. As a result, today's Chinese people still suffer from the conflict between their self-confidence and inferiority.

Wars ended, followed by the establishment of contemporary China, officially the People's Republic of China (PRC) governed by the Communist Party of China, in the year of 1949. While the history of contemporary China is about inside struggles and

²⁰ "The Flow of History." FC124: The Decline of Imperial China (c.1800-1911) - The Flow of History. Accessed February 16, 2017. <http://www.flowofhistory.com/units/eme/18/FC124>.

²¹ More information please search: Eight-Nation Alliance

chaos, China has learned how to find a thorough new way fitting the time and the people to dominate the country. For these lessons, however, China paid heavily. Because of complicated political, economic and ideological reasons nationally and internationally, China did not start to embrace the Western world and to keep pace with times and globalization until the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy in 1979.

Cultural Revolution

Following Soviet Union and Marxism after World War II under the governance of the Communist Party of China, modern China has taken a lot of lessons and cost enormously since its establishment in the year of 1949, with the purpose of finding its own new way for ruling and developing this country which is both old and new. In this process, China has gone through a number of historically influential events, especially the Cultural Revolution, also known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution, occurring in modern China between 1966 and 1976, was a socio-political movement launched by the Chairman of the Communist Party Mao Zedong in the history of China. It strives for the governing role of Maoist thought in the Party. Noticeably, Red Guards, paramilitary bands composed of students, were organized by Mao and his associates to re-obtain the upper hand, to attack symbols of authority like traditional customs, religious beliefs, books and teachers, to overturn the society and increase the loyalty to the chairman and his thought. In this period, a large number of cultural and traditional heritages and treasures were destroyed, accompanied

by the closing of factories and schools. Nowadays, the Cultural Revolution is always referred to by people as the “ten-year catastrophe”.

The function of art was strictly confined to propaganda during the Cultural Revolution, usually applied to educate the masses or to deliver the ideas of the Party. The “communion” of camaraderie, the cult of martyrs and heroes, the mysticism of sacrifice and blood, the commitment to the country, the symbolism of resurrection and death, and all other factors made great contribution to the dissemination of the myth among soldiers that all forms of existence should be renewed by politics. As advocated by Mao, the combination of romanticism and realism in the style of Soviet Socialist Realist art should be a prior task for artists. In other words, art should try to be idealistic by including recognizable, life-like imagery, and provide visions of a socialist, modern and prosperous nation. The portrait of Mao in a huge number of posters is surrounded by a rising sun, signified by a radiant halo.

Reform and Opening up Policy

Deng Xiaoping, one of the leading pragmatists, emerged as China’s new paramount leader and began modernizing and opening up China to the outside world. 改革开放, literally translated as ‘Reform and Opening Up’, was the most influential governmental policy change since the national establishment of the People’s Republic of China; changing the lives of people over the course of three decades. The policy began to introduce market principles in 1978 and was carried out in two stages. Lasting from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, the first stage involved promising entrepreneurs to start

businesses, opening up the nation to foreign investment, and decollectivizing agriculture of the country. The second stage occurred between the late 1980s and the 1990s, garnering an unprecedented annual economic growth rate of 9.5% between 1978 and 2013²². In this period, much of the state-owned industry was privatized and contracted out, and regulations, protectionist policies, and price controls were lifted. However, state monopolies in petroleum, banking, and other sectors remained unchanged.

The West, however, merely regarded these changes as Chinese economic reform. Actually, the policy cannot be simply regarded as Chinese economic reform. Although an exclusionary tactic, or rather, a strictly controlled choice of trade and technology limited intercultural contact in the official policy of “Open Door,” the same word was used by the younger generation to mean “opening,” which embraces new lifestyles from outsiders, threatening official orthodoxy. The dynamic concept of opening up suggests that China’s culture would not be static, containing the potential of redefining the cultural core of its homeland. “Even a notorious government would fail to keep abreast of numerous thoughts, ideas and things that would flood the country after the door was opened to the West.”²³

²² "GDP growth (annual %)." GDP growth (annual %) | Data. Accessed February 16, 2017. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CN>. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CN>

²³ Vogel, Ezra F. “The Tiananmen Tragedy, : May 17–June 4, 1989”. 2011. “The Tiananmen Tragedy, : May 17–June 4, 1989”. In Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China, 616–39. Harvard University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbw2f.27>.

The Influence of Tiananmen Square Event

Younger generations expected some changes in the culture core of this country under the guidance and influence of the Reform and Opening-up Policy. After its failure, a number of student leaders stated that the tragedy would not have occurred if they had considered the possible dangers and did not display such a strong sense of personal importance. Some suggest that the shootings might have been avoided if the troops for bringing order by peaceful means were not stopped by Beijing residents on May 20. At the same time, Chinese critics of Westerners believe that the movement would never have been out of control if the foreign “black hands” had not attempted to damage the socialist system and Chinese communism, and if Westerners had not stimulated students to join the protests.

Ultimately, the Tiananmen Square event of 1989 failed, indicating the end of the chance of converting the country into a democracy society. A large number of artists chose to immigrate into other countries after this event, while others still stayed in China. In addition to mourning the killed and injured, students and their families also mourned the loss of expectation for the emergence of a more moral and open society of China. It is naïve to expect leaders of the country to give up their power or to challenge them. After that, there was a common belief amongst the masses that progress can only be made by gradually establishing a foundation, by slowly developing experience in freedom and democracy, by enhancing understanding of public issues, and by improving more people’s economic livelihood. They came to know that economic growth could be promoted on the basis of stability that only the party can maintain, and longed for the

development of a more solid base for a freer society after decades of economic growth and stability.

ART:

Cultural Context for Artists in ancient China

China is both an old and a new country. It has possessed prosperous civilization throughout various dynasties for over 5,000 years. Although art, culture, and religion are often tied together, unlike the West, ancient Chinese art was not taken advantage as a tool of “propaganda” for political or religious stability. China has several main philosophies or religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. They provided artists with new tasks, thus influencing Chinese art. Furthermore, different to artists in the Renaissance or in ancient Greece, Chinese artists were highly revered due to the influence of these philosophies and religions. At that time, Chinese people considered painters as admirable as inspired poets, rather than regarded the creation of paintings as a menial task. It was a religious belief in the East that the right kind of meditation was more important than all other things. According to *The Story of Art*, “To meditate is to think and ponder about the same holy truth for many hours on end, to fix an idea in one’s mind and to look at it from all sides without letting go of it.” Different ideas of Chinese art have the common objective of capturing moods of the landscape, contemplating beauty of nature the, and learning characteristics of the nature²⁴. Basically, Artists are mainly from elite classes, the scholars, and the Literati-official class. And even rulers of the country need to learn techniques and obtain integrity in art. While different dynasties had witnessed the constant change of ancient Chinese art styles.

²⁴ Gombrich, Ernst H. "Chapter 9: Looking Eastwards." *The Story of Art: Pocket Edition*. Berlin: Phaidon, 2011.

In addition, many avant-garde artists and classical Chinese scholars hold the art idea that the human body is not to control the nature, but is matter made conscious of the harmony with the nature. Here is another difference between China and the West. And some critics thought that modern Chinese artists can follow the ancient idea as a strategy for their modern style recreating.²⁵ According to the Judeo-Christian-Muslim view, since only people are enlivened by the breath of God, there should be essential difference between human beings and the rest of creation. Meanwhile, Chinese people believe that the body of human beings is not simply matter enlivened; it is conscious of death and conscious of itself.

Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art History

At the beginning of 20th century, each powerful Western nation endeavoured to have the maximum control over China. The Chinese people initiated the Revolution of 1911 as a result of their dissatisfaction with inability of the present government and resent of foreigners. Consequently, the Republic of China led by Sun Yat-sen replaced the Chinese imperial system which had last for nearly 2000 years.

Plenty of artists were aroused under such a chaotic context. A “New National Painting” movement was inaugurated by Gao Qifeng and his peers who had visited Japan.

Subsequently, a Lingnan, or Cantonese regional style came into being, bringing Euro-

²⁵ Wiseman, Mary Bittner. 2007. “Subversive Strategies in Chinese Avant-garde Art”. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (1). [Wiley, American Society for Aesthetics]: 109–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4622215>.

Japanese characteristics. Apart from being attracted to Japan, an increasing number of young Chinese artists had keen interest in Paris and German art by the mid-1920s. Among these artists, the most influential ones are Liu Haisu (劉海粟), Lin Fengmian (林風眠) and Xu Beihong (徐悲鴻) because they brought some understanding of the essential movements and traditions from contemporary Europe. Specifically, Liu Haisu was attracted to Impressionist art; Lin Fengmian was inspired by pattern of the Fauves and Henri Matisse and the experiments in colour. Xu Beihong, who fond of more conservative Parisian academic styles, eschewed European Modernist movements. Gradually, Socialist Realist standards were carried out throughout the 1950s. Then, Chinese artists encountered unprecedented hardships during the Cultural Revolution, though they enjoyed a period of political relaxation in the early 1960s.

Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, Chinese art entered into a new or refreshing stage after 1976. Traditional Chinese painting resurged in the 1980s, featuring the emergence of Wu Guanzhong (吳冠中) and other fresh talents, as well as the return of those artists who were disgraced previously, such as Huang Yongyu (黃永玉) and Li Keran (李可染). In the attempt of bringing Chinese painting to a higher level, Chinese artists started to try new techniques and subjects. Thus, the pursuit of innovation and individuality in the framework of one's "symphonic" heritage has been a hallmark of Chinese painting throughout the ages. At China Online Museum, the painting galleries provide an overview of some primary Chinese painting movements and traditions by giving a representative selection of individual "performances".

Beginning of Exhibitions in 1979

It can be said that the beginning of contemporary Chinese art history is marked by the Star Exhibition. Throughout China in the 1980s, artists who had learned from the West experimented with western art concepts and forms, and made up "avant-garde" art groups. Without permission, these groups exhibited their works on railings near the China Art Gallery in September 1979. Then, they launched a protest march when forced to remove the artworks. Finally, they were permitted to display their works in a special event, attracting the participation of over 80,000 visits, marking a watershed of freedom for Chinese art. However, the triumph of the art groups did not last for a long time. In the following ten years, the China Art Gallery saw the absence of experimental art in its official exhibition space. As a result, the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition, another ground-breaking event, occurred in 1989. Since then, the works of Xu Bing, Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun, Wang Guangyi, Gu Wenda and other avant-garde Chinese artists have been increasingly exhibited in biennials, galleries and museums all over the world, rather than shown only in China. Obviously, without the courageous stand of the artist groups in 1979, it would be impossible for contemporary Chinese art to enjoy such dramatic developments and to obtain international recognition.

China/Avant-Garde in 1989

After delays due to the forces of conservatism, financial problems, and political circumstances, the National Gallery, Beijing opened the first national avant-garde art exhibition, entitled China/Avant-Garde (“中国现代艺术展” in Chinese), on February 5,

1989. The exhibition included a total of 293 installations, videos, sculptures and paintings by 186 artists such as Wenda Gu, Huang Yong Ping, Wu Shan Zhuan, Xu Bing, and Wang Guangyi. A stir was caused by Mao Zedong No. 1 created by Wang. In addition, the Political Pop became popular in the early 1990s due to the inspiration from Wang's Pop Art-influenced style.

Within two weeks, China/Avant-Garde was forcedly closed twice. When Xiao Lu and Tang Song fired two gunshots just hours after the opening for their performance Dialogue, the exhibition was closed for the first time. Because anonymous bomb threats were sent to the Beijing Public Security Bureau, the municipal government and the gallery, the second closing occurred.

Yong Jiechang, Huang Yong Ping and Gu Dexin took part in an exhibition in Paris held by the Pompidou Centre, known as Les Magiciens de la terre. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, it might be the first exhibition of works by avant-garde Chinese artists in a famous international event. Huang stayed in France after leaving China to participating in the event.

April saw the beginning of pro-democracy student-led demonstrations. The national avant-garde exhibition, as a result of the return of conservatism and the crackdown in Tiananmen Square on June 4, was criticized as a representative of bourgeois liberalism. It brought the possibility of shaping a modern China society since Chinese artists could enjoy more access to Western art techniques and ideas. Nonetheless, misunderstandings always exist, because people constantly associate contemporary art

with politics. Moreover, modern and contemporary art was openly accepted in China after the passing of another few decades, and is now widely known to the masses.

Two Major Symbols in Chinese Political Art

Tiananmen Square

Main political symbol in China, is a famous monument in Beijing, the capital of the People's Republic of China. It is widely used as a national symbol. First built in 1420 during the Ming dynasty, Tiananmen is often referred to as the front entrance to the Forbidden City.

The protest movement in 1989 happened in Tiananmen Square. As a huge square in the city centre of Beijing, Tiananmen Square separates "Gate of Heavenly Peace" from the Forbidden City. The Mausoleum of Mao Zedong, the National Museum of China, the Great Hall of the People, and the Monument to the People's Heroes can be seen in the square. Tragic implications were brought to the political street theatre of 1989 since Tiananmen Square was a sacralized political space. The design of Beijing, the capital of China, determined the design of the square. Before Beijing truly became a city, it was only an idea. In the language of space, mass, and architecture rather than in words, the urban design expresses the view that Beijing was the pivot of the four quarters, the center of the world, and the termination of axis of the universe on the earth. Modeled on Moscow's Red Square, the design of Tiananmen Square highlights the thought of axuality, concentricity, and centrality. It is a sign of adjacency to the heart of things, instead of inventive craziness or popular appeal.

Accordingly, Tiananmen Square is considered the sign of totalitarian, and the place for military sublime and secular ritual. In terms of exploring the relation between the

collective and the individual, Beijing might be a perfect target of study, because it is beyond any mundane description of tourist sites, buildings or streets. A shared aesthetic of the sublime there could increase charisma of the entire city. With this regard, it has been pointed out that the hunger strike in the Tiananmen Square on June 4th, 1989 aimed not to achieve a tactical purpose but to reach a symbolic objective: to show the full preparation of students to sacrifice themselves for the nation and the people. Through the theatrical mode of political movement on Tiananmen Square, they contested the Party's monopoly of the charisma of power on its own sacred ground and in its own terms, rather than only bargained for resources or rights.

Mao

Chairman Mao, or Mao Tse-tung, or Mao Zedong, was a founding father of the People's Republic of China and a Chinese communist revolutionary. Since the establishment of new China in 1949, Mao Zedong, as the Chairman of the Communist Party of China, had ruled the country in an autocrat style. The well-known Marxism-Leninism-Maoism or Maoism features his political policies, military strategies, and Marxist–Leninist theories.

Because of the Cultural Revolution, Andy Warhol's remake of the 1970s and the portrait of Mao on the frontispiece of the Little Red Book, his portrait might be reproduced mostly frequently thorough the history. His big portrait was situated on the central axis of the city plan, in the center of the Tiananmen. Since the Zhou dynasty in China, due to the implication of central imperial power, this axis has generated among most Chinese capitals the cosmological and ideological spine. Similar to early Byzantine icons, it operates by making those unavailable to the senses become visible. In addition to

contemplating human beings, the icon also become the gaze of God on the beholder of whoever discovers themselves caught within the circuit of transformative and informative relationships.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution and the embrace of the Reform and Opening up Policy, attitudes towards Mao and his portrait keep changing. First of all, some people are subject to Maocraze, namely, a kind of nostalgia for unblemished ideological zeal and relative economic stability in the past brought by totalitarian politics, unlike recent economic liberalization from the looser atmosphere, which is feature by the existence of anxieties and insecurities. At the same time some artists follow Western standards and make full use of Mao's portraits, since "anti-establishment" has simplistically become the label of modern Chinese art, resulting in the lack of common sense from irrelevant self-interest conditions which take up the huge proportion of the market, or about state of existence, or the current cultural conditions. This kind of art boasts political correctness, attempts to solve all types of problems simultaneously, and deals with ideology and politics in a simplistic way. Nonetheless, western standards have absolutely dictated and such sanctimonious and hypocritical actions.

After all, artists think and paint Mao through their reflections of history, based on their rich expression of emotion and reason and according to their expectations on modern life. Actually, most works tend to avoid political and social issues, or mention these issues merely via introverted self-regard, self-flagellation, ridicule, self-mockery, evasion, equivocation or ambiguity, cynical asides, or a nearly monastic concentration

on individual consciousness. Apparently, Mao as a symbol is not merely for political attraction.

Interviews

I interviewed four interviewees anonymously with their approval. The purpose of the anonymous interviews is to get more information by those interviewees who felt uncomfortable to talk about the historic event they experienced. Moreover, anonymity is also a protection for interviewees' daily life. I made up interviewees' names.

The First Interviewee, Zhou Chi

Background

The first interviewee, Zhou Chi, comes from a fourth-or fifth- tier city in the east of China. He is a traditional Chinese ink painter. He served respectively as the Secretary of the City's Artists Association, an official national organization, and then a vice chairman, and now the honored chairman of the association. Meanwhile, he served as the director of the provincial artist association and worked for the Chinese Painting Research Council. He experienced both the Cultural Revolution and the age in which the Tiananmen event occurred.

Cultural Revolution

As revealed by Zhou Chi, the reason why the Cultural Revolution came about was due to a close relation with the failure of the Soviet Union. China's chairman Mao was afraid the same thing would occur in China—the breaking of the Communist Party. Therefore, Chairman Mao meant to identify all the people in China who did not sincerely support

Communism. Even for the purpose of consolidating the regime, the decision was very cruel.

During the Cultural Revolution, family background was an important indicator to classify people into different groups. If their parents and even grandparents were soldiers, peasants or workers, they would enjoy the preferable background. Initially, Zhou Chi seemed safe since his parents were peasants. However, when people finally figured out that his parents were rich peasants (fu nong 富农), things became different.

As a painter, he was not allowed to select the theme at his own will like other painters in China at that time. The only purpose for him to “produce” paintings was for the party propaganda, to show how right the political policies were and how great the leaders were. Zhou Chi joked that he thought he was just a literal prostitute, to please the politicians. Even painting the “right” themes, it was still not safe during that period. In a windy day, the interviewee put the finished draft of the portrait of Chairman Mao on the ground by his feet, and continued to work on another portrait on the drawing board by his hands. Someone witnessed and submitted the case to the superior, because he thought his behavior showed no respect for Mao; then a meeting to accuse of the behavior started. Many great artists and intellectuals suffered from similar meetings and some of them cannot stand more but chose to commit suicide. About the special meeting against him, Zhou Chi said that he admitted blatantly all the crimes he committed, deeply reflected on his behavior and supported the Communists so frankly that no one found the inner pretension. With a sort of honor, he said, “a true hero should

survive, no matter how he survives.” Out of expectation, there was indeed no bitterness or sorrow when he talked about his story. When mentioning the past, he laughed as if he had never been hurt. It can thereby be assumed that some Chinese people have a specifically gifted sense of humor as a resilience ability to face so much toughness in their life. Humor is always the most powerful weapon against all totalitarian powers. As Walter Benjamin suggested, “The despot is the ideal subject of humor, because in him judgment and execution are one.”²⁶

The Cultural Revolution lasted for ten years. It is hard to imagine how desperately everyone suffered during this long term. Even though the story told by Zhou Chi was simple, his real life was not that easy. Because of some reasons, the dark side of his family story was hidden from him. When a man was so careless, it is easy to imagine how much fear his wife had to face.

Tiananmen Square Event

After the Cultural Revolution, relaxing and good days finally came. The Reform and Opening up policy in the first place was not just for economy, but also for real freedom among all Chinese people. At that time, with the influence from Magic Realism associated with Latin American literature, Scar Literature emerged, portraying the sufferings of cadres and intellectuals during the tragic experiences of the Cultural

²⁶ Cho, Hyowon. "Humor or Dying Voice—Hamlet between Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt." *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 91, no. 3 (2016): 258-76. doi:10.1080/00168890.2016.1190626.

Revolution²⁷. Writers tried to find out what the ten years brought to every person and how the Cultural Revolution shaped the rooted identity for the time being. Various artistic waves emerged and people had the real open and sincere mind to embrace the world.

In the political field, some politicians with real power who joined the Cultural Revolution before were opposed to freedom, trying to shut the door again. Zhou Chi didn't attend the event in Beijing. However, his daughter, a student studied in Beijing at that time, did participate in the event. From the political sensitivity of an adult who witnessed the ten years' Cultural Revolution with his peers, he immediately felt the fear and again was afraid of the rebirth of the Cultural Revolution. After a while, they realized that a big-scale Cultural Revolution won't happen again. Without the credibility of the government, secular Chinese people chose to immerse into the business world and become a materialist, giving up the innocent and passionate idealism.

Art

About the relation between these political events and art, Zhou Chi said that these events led them to notice that there was no real influential artist in China and no exclusive artistic style from China. He admired Ai Weiwei and viewed him as a “national fighter”, not an artist, because the influence from Ai Weiwei is not mainly brought by his artworks but his ideas. Ai Weiwei's ideas reflect the real dilemma and plights in China

²⁷ Chen, Xiaoming (1996). "The Disappearance of Truth: From Realism to Modernism in China". In Chung, Hilary. *In the Party Spirit: Socialist Realism and Literary Practice in the Soviet Union, East Germany, and China*. Rodopi. pp. 158–166. [ISBN 905183957X](#)

and he is willing to speak aloud to the World. While unique and new Chinese art style in the modern society has not emerged yet, the flourishing of art needs the enriched cultural accumulation and the free environment. Under the burden of the censorship, China's culture and art lack an independent outlook or rational attitude on social reform, and does not play an active role in social ideology. It still needs to come into being from "self-adjustment, the relatively closed-minded state, even after so many years."²⁸

And Zhou Chi himself admitted that he is the one who just keeps the spirit in heart, following the traditional Chinese philosophy with his own pride for "self-cultivation". In the past, he worked in the national artistic system, but he has never been subordinated to the government's will. Finally, he suggested the young generation, with a shrewd smile, to feel free to have two faces, but also stated, "You need to understand which the fake face is and why it is necessary; that is the practical way when you have to face the government."

²⁸ ABRAHAMSEN, ERIC. 2011. "Chinese Contemporary Art in Dilemma and Transition: POSTED ON FEBRUARY 4, 2006". In *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009*, edited by LEE AMBROZY, 14–18. MIT Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhg38.9>.

The Second Interviewee, Wang Yang

Background

Wang Yang was a “progressive student” and an active participant for in the Tiananmen Square Event. At that time, he was an undergraduate student in a well-known Academy of Art in Beijing. After the event, following the government’s instruction, schools had to list all the students who attended the event, which impacted the allocation of their work after their graduation. (During that period, college students would get a job from college work allocation, which means they didn’t get jobs by themselves but by the government/schools.) Without the allocation of a decent job, he now works as a salesman and plans to immigrate to the United States by getting a Green Card through investments²⁹.

1989 and Tiananmen Square Event

Unlike Zhou Chi, Wang Yang was more reserved and constrained in the first place. From his perspective, the reason why he attended the Event came from his sense of responsibility to change the situation in China for the time being. At that time, people and students were quite innocent with the great expectation that China would become an open and advanced country if they could make their contributions and efforts. Retrospectively, the 1980s was a period of political openness and commercial pressures that had not yet arrived, and this period gave the ideal breeding ground for the idealistic zest which could stimulate utopian fantasies. Before the Event, 1989 China

²⁹ "EB-5 Immigrant Investor Program." USCIS. Accessed February 16, 2017. <https://www.uscis.gov/eb-5>.

Avant-Garde exhibition was held in the same year. From the slogan of an artist, Gu Deyu, we can see what mental conditions and spirits Chinese people had during the 1980s: “I think Chinese artists have no money and no big studios. But except those, we have everything. And everything is the best.”

On the other side, Wang Yang also admitted that there was no detailed and well-developed plan to convert the whole system of the country. What they held was purely enthusiasm. He himself said that he was just too passionate and stirred up by the stream. In fact, he didn't have a real political sense to face the situation. After the event was suppressed by the government, he was neither killed nor arrested, but he still received personal punishment. If the 1989 Tiananmen Square Event did not happen or he wasn't an active participant, he would pursue his graduate program of art as a recommended student for admission in the same academy based on the support from official offices. However, the admission was deprived because of his participation in the event. Then he chose to change his career, devoting himself to the commercial world like what many Chinese people did at that time. The most impressive influence actually was not from his life but the thorough disappointment to the government. “The trust collapsed”, he said.

Mao-craze

Talking about Mao-craze and Political Pop Art in China, Wang Yang recommended a book, *Status Anxiety* by Alain de Botton. In his opinion, the phenomenon that today everyone feels the anxiety of their status in relation to financial achievement is indeed a global problem. With the increase of international trades and industrial revolutions, there

is an extraordinary expansion in economic opportunities, life expectancy, and physical security, the availability of consumer goods, scientific knowledge, food supply and wealth. To be more specific, there is increasing concern about income, achievement and importance. Now, people need to consider the underlying psychology which determines our precise decision on how much is enough. Under the planned economy, people are settled by the government's plan. People's physical life is organized and they do not need to worry about their frustrating future. Hence the Mao-craze actually is a kind of nostalgia for the economic and status stability and unblemished ideological zeal as a utopia. To solve these problems of anxiety, Alain de Botton provided the way to find the answers through philosophy, art, politics, religion and Bohemia. And Wang Yang eased his pressure through religion-he became a Christian after his depression.

Art

Wang Yang also believed that there is a close and deep relation between art and the political and social environment. If we see contemporary Chinese artworks, not only for the international market, but also for the local and regional market, we can perceive ugliness, depression and vacancy in these artworks, which reflect Chinese spiritual and mental conditions for the time being. Chaos and emptiness fill in many Chinese people's spiritual life. Under the global consumerism and industrialization, people are lured by temptations of wealth.

In the last two decades, China's artists experienced violent ideological, economic, cultural and political changes. Without exception, ideological struggle has always followed shifts in political power. From the economic perspective, on the verge of

extinction, a system reshaped itself into a materialist society. In other words, a society filled with both potentials and crises was remade from a society full of utopian communist ideals, becoming an increasing integral part of the world. This series of changes have resulted in the profound cultural uniqueness of China, or rather, its possession of this mysterious power.

The main features of Chinese artists' life are a loss of self, doubt and destructiveness, change and disorder, remarkable multiplicity and confusion, feeling of emptiness, shamelessness and pleasure which accompanies it, as well as the mixture of hopelessness and freedom. It can be noticed in artworks that their common theme is the exploration into the culture, history and politics of China, the authenticity of the self, spirituality, repentance sex, reform, the collective and the individual, methodology, art, material wealth and the West.

With the assistance of the mistrust of public morality among these works, their secular nature, examination on the inner world of individuals, ability to transform and change, and expression of indistinctness and uncertainty, contemporary Chinese artists can make their inquiry into the national plight. In this ancient Eastern nation, the willingness of deliberately confounding right and wrong, as well as illusion, manifold significance, ambiguity, and metaphor have long been used to express particular Chinese modes of speech and thought and Chinese culture.

Although China's economy has been developing at a dramatic speed, art and culture have always still lagged behind economic development. Hence Chinese people felt a

lack of dissemination ideology and thoughts in a deep and wide way. Even though the people figured out the situation, they cannot solve the problems because of the strict censorship and disappointment with and distrust against the government. Recently, with the rise of the middle class in China, there is an emerging group called “perfect egoists”. Perfect egoists are well-educated persons with high IQs and understand how to cleverly use the power of the system to maximize their own benefits and interests. A respectable professor in the top 2 universities of China has pointed out this idea³⁰. What he intended to convey is his expectation of Chinese students to be responsible for their society, instead of becoming the vassal of power. He hopes that the students do not use their newly acquired secular and sophisticated performance to abuse their power after gaining it in the future.

³⁰ "北大教授钱理群：北大等大学正培养利己主义者." Accessed February 16, 2017.
<http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2012-05-03/040724359951.shtml>.

The Third Interviewee, Cai Xing

Background

The third interviewee, Cai Xing, a fine art student in Beijing who majored in mural paintings, graduated in the year of 1989. At that time, he was also a member of a performance art group called “Concept 21,” which gradually gained attention because of the 30th anniversary celebration of the Opening Up policy. After the Tiananmen Event, with a confusion and disappointment for the future of art and the society, he chose to work in the United States as an artist, while in 2000s he came back to China and worked for an art organization.

Concept 21 in 1980s

One day in the winter of 1986, in one of the top universities in Beijing, a few young people, under the stunned gaze of thousands of teacher and student onlookers, put ink to their head and face at first, and then watered their whole body. The performers claimed that this was performance art. Thus, this daring group of young students, coming from China’s prestigious art academies, established Concept 21, with some members eventually going on to become the top authorities of Chinese contemporary art. This performance led some academic debates and discussion. A few years later, the only domestic art journal “China Art News (Zhong Guo Mei Shu Bao)” published the incident, calling the behavior experimental art. This meant one theoretical authority in the industry affirmed the academic seriousness of the participants. Without the support of the advanced media, these students would have faced the risk of being ousted from

the schools because of the aggressive executive power of some people in the school's management.

Following their initial performance, Concept 21 showcased many more of their artistic behaviors and practices at several locations in Beijing. At a museum in 1989, Concept 21 finished their last act in China. In the same year, after the Tiananmen Event, Zhong Guo Mei Shu Bao was forced to cease publication.

Cai Xing told more details about the art college education in the 1980s. When he had studied in the Academy, the domestic art education system had still been following the Soviet Union's art education mode. Realism is the only form of the official recognition. Hence the entire art education was solidified in a very narrow range. In contrast, this social background cultivated a rebellious attitude. In fact, the political system itself, with its excessive interference in artworks and other related reasons, made many artists unable to gain social recognition by their personal art styles and characteristics.

European Dadaism appeared under the similar situation from the 1916 to 1923. They pursued the sober irrational state, rejected the convention of art standards, and sought the unintentional, accidental, and impromptu feelings. Therefore, in his opinion, Dadaism is an anarchist art movement, led by a group of young artists and anti-war activists. And that was the reason why Concept 21 was established and what it followed.

Performance Art, the Great Wall

Concept 21 selected many historical sites as background for their performance. The reason was that they wanted to take things from traditional Chinese culture. Civilization has been the cultural essence through the country's inheritance for thousands of years. Although Chinese civilization has had dialogue with the world for a long time now, China had not brought big, global changes. The reason, from his point of view, is because what China transmits is not the valuable thoughts (such as Lao Tzu, Confucius, etc., who are hard to understand and lack effective ways for communication), but merely a bunch of valuable commerce that are easily accepted - such as ceramics and silk. Of course, there are irreplaceable essences of Chinese culture in its own history of development. Unfortunately, some values are limited to their own local areas, and they didn't become a culture to promote to the outside world. On the other hand, some output, which did not initially reflect the spirit of Chinese culture, met the material desires from the outside world, and, in turn, affected Chinese output to some extent by echoing the aesthetic needs of Western aristocracy.

In addition, the social form and human structure of China has remained under one individual right from history until just recently. The rights chose the culture, which is contrary to the development of human civilization. We say that art is particularly important because of the diversity of expression, thereby highlighting the individual contribution to culture, rather than in a fixed pattern of monotony copy. What Concept 21 wanted to express at this point is reflection of China's cultural history, and the

development of diverse artistic expression amongst restriction of the country's political system; that is, the essence of art is its expression of freedom.

All of Concept 21's artwork were not designed and planned before the implementation; almost all were on-site impromptu performances. Many of the performances did not have members exchanging any words, but the final show was very dramatic. This was not their intention, on the contrary, they tried to avoid. What they wanted to achieve was finding whether there was a real difference between reality and drama.

The Great Wall is a big symbol. I asked him for his opinion about artist Marina Abramovic, the "grandmother of performance art". The artwork is named as "The lovers": Abramović & her lover Ulay walked the Great Wall of China from opposite ends, and they met in the middle and broke up. Cai Xing thought it was dramatic, and in a sense it was perhaps what she wanted. The end of the relationship was the watershed of Abramović artistic career. Her work has undergone many changes, and has enjoyed a reputation of being alone. But generally speaking, her later works are not a breakthrough in nature, she is more performing and dramatic, and this is precisely contrary to her pre-thinking, "behavioral artists must hate the drama, because that can approach the real."

Artist, Give up as an Artist

Cai Xing didn't mention a lot about his work in the United States and why he came back to China again. What he said was just the decisions were made by his mind. To be an artist as a career is to rely on selling their paintings and making a living. The

prerequisite of continuing to paint is that there are clients to buy. Therefore, there is a question that artists cannot evade: paint for the market or for their own. Of course, there are some successful artists without such pressure that the market has already chosen. Unfortunately, not all the artists are as lucky, and they are facing that problem. For him, choosing to be a non-professional is also quite upsetting, though the advantage is that he can paint what he wants; “Like Van Gogh,” he mentioned.

Finally, he told me that 1989 is not only the political event which changed the political and social environment of China, but also a watershed in Chinese contemporary art history. In 1989, before the Tiananmen Square Event, the art exhibition China/Avant-Garde opened for the public. It can be said that it is the most controversial exhibition in China since the founding of the People’s Republic of China. He had the honor to carry the Concept 21 works to participate in this exhibition. The significance of this exhibition is to represent the starting point of Chinese contemporary art. Because both the form and content and the way artists were destined to participate in this exhibition for only once. In addition, it was the first time that foreign media covered and concerned art exhibition in China. At that time, Chinese art started to gain the understanding and acceptance of the West, and then the involvement of follow-up capital and promotion came. Ultimately, the Chinese contemporary art into the so-called Western art platform.

The Fourth Interviewee, Wu Guojia

Background

Born in Beijing, the fourth interviewee, Wu Guojia, is a Chinese contemporary artist, active mainly in photography, contemporary ink, video art, as well as performance art and installation. He was a representative artist in Chinese contemporary art working overseas. He is part of a generation of artists who grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution, and in the 1980s turned from traditional forms of painting to installation art and performance-based work.

He has very delightful and talkative characteristics. Several interviews were held, collecting bits of information about him at a time. Under the influence of the Cultural Revolution, he was not able to have a basic education, and thus turned to learn traditional Chinese paintings when he was 15 years old. In the early 1980s, after having studied traditional painting for over 10 years, he participated in Beijing's Yuanming yuan art group and started experimenting with contemporary ink.

Following the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, he began to become known for his subversive and critical stance toward conservative artistic language and pursuit of a new independent and individualistic style. Wu Guojia once said in the early 1990s, "Avant-garde art should be a sharp knife, a weeping flower."

In the mid-90s, Wu Guojia finally immigrated to the United States, continuing to explore the experimental side of contemporary ink painting and calligraphy. He also continued

to use his body itself as a mean to ponder immigration, assimilation, and the different psychological challenges faced by individuals and society from different cultural backgrounds. Several performance pieces from this period would eventually become important chapters of contemporary Chinese performance art history. Now he almost returned to China once a year for family, friends, and meditation as a Taoist.

Abstract Ink Painting

The change from the traditional painting to the abstract ink painting happened in the mid-80s. Under that special period, the traditional techniques cannot express his concern for the real living environment. Especially after the Tiananmen Event, he created a “Square” series to address his critical and political attitude, also a tribute to democracy and freedom. Meanwhile, he started another series in 1989, which affected himself to use ink to express his involvement under such circumstances. He was interested the current historical events. He thought modern abstract ink painting can better illustrate the artist's life, life, family, feelings of the world than the traditional one, which can demonstrate the spirit of participation.

After the Tiananmen Event, although he got some support from foreigners to live abroad, he chose to stay in Beijing. And at that time, there was a struggle against the physical world and the emotion was depressed. No galleries, no free exchange of space to share. And there would be a lot of troubles to open a show. Although it is early 1990s, the news is still one standard sound by the government and the spread of culture is little. Guojia often appeared in the Beijing’s diplomatic apartment, where foreigners lived. Sometimes the Associated Press and Agence Fance-Presse bought his photos.

Sometimes they held cultural exchange activities. Thus, he gained international friends, giving him more opportunities to learn about art and the outside world.

In China, Guojia worked as an independent artist, meaning he was out of the governmental system. Without the government's management, his main challenge became the competitive market. He admitted that he was confused about how to keep the balance. He could no longer insist on the seriousness of art. Like many Chinese people holding onto the integrity of tradition, he thought the deal was based on the understanding and communication of art, and an artist's dignity could not be sold in the face of the market.

Come to USA

In New York, Wu Guojia exchanged ink art with various ethnic groups, and actively held solo exhibitions and lectures to share spiritual connotations originating from oriental culture. After coming to USA, the living environment, psychological changes, and New York as a contemporary art capital had a great impact on him. He has since always tried to incorporate these elements into his understanding of contemporary art – the characteristics of American industrialization, the city of steel and cement, and even the city's weather affected his creative thinking.

Rock and roll in the late 80s on his paintings had an impact. He has been experimenting with the flow of music and metal melody into and subvert his paintings. In New York, while he listened to Bruce music, which inspired the idea of accumulating his creative

mood. Secular life was important to infect, deconstruct, and destruct his spiritual world. And then finally, ecstasy.

As an artist living in New York, he feels more and more voices from different strata of Chinese contemporary art and ink art. In the academic circles of the United States, they are willing to know and see more works from independent artists in China, and some people think that the material itself is different, "the material of canvas is more expensive than the material of paper". Is a long-term misreading; historical reasons for the formation are complex.

In Guojia's opinion, on the nature and aesthetic of art, any art, including the regional characteristics of the artistic expression, there is no boundary. It is the common expression of the human mind language. In the West, though there are some art theory professionals, they understand Chinese contemporary ink using the eye rather than the mind, causing misreading and bias. On the other side, in China's academic circles and people, there is a wrong perception – that the majority of the West cannot read ink art; this is a misreading as well.

Art

"Do you like rock and roll? I like it. I also like the traditional culture of my country. Tao has influenced me a lot. Meanwhile I live in such a modern society. My work is trying to express the sense that the contradiction on the surface but the relation inside. I want to express the harmony between human and nature, letting them shared the same emotions by the East traditions and cultures." said Wu Guojia as he talked about his art

idea and works full of passion and eagerness for the comments. To him, how to show the fresh beauty of today, representing today's things and the spiritual world might be the most significant. There is no doubt that there are number of explorations and hardships to change his life and art style. While he did not want to talk about the hardships inside, he thought an artist's growth could not escape from hardships. The hardships come both from the outside world's changes and also from the sensitive sense and struggles of an artist's mind.

At the end of the talk, Wu Guojia said, in the past, Westerners believed that China was poor, and so was the Chinese art. "I didn't believe," he stated, "Now they started to buy more Chinese art. And my ambition never changed: I want to use my works to show that Chinese traditional culture can be treated as a modern art to provide a broad creative world and to prove the charm of Chinese art."

Discussion

The four interviews involve a wide range of topics related to art and politics, contemporary Chinese art and the interviewees' own life stories. What the interviews try to record through collecting the interviewees' stories and opinions is a comprehensive picture about what happened before and after June 4th, 1989. The use of this method could throw a glance at the "big" history of the 1980s. According to the opinion of Hou Hanru, it is the time to witness the end of history, as we have heard in the past thirty years, or gradually know history as decentralized. It is now impossible or irrelevant to perceive history as a linear, stable, and established "grand narrative" of humanity or to see and narrate it with the capital "H". Instead, it may be more reliable and likely to multiply diverse historical narratives which define and contour reality based on permanent, multidimensional alterations and changes. In other words, there are various perspectives for people to conceive history.

The backgrounds of these four interviewees are quite different. We can see how they pursued or gave up their art career along the intricate paths. Meanwhile, we can perceive how chaotic and disordered the Chinese art market is. The first interviewee is an artist engaged in traditional ink painting under the government system, which means that his work followed aesthetic standards. Nevertheless, from his interview, it can be noticed that he suffered from an inner struggle and conflict. Obviously, he was not a real supporter of the system while he shrewdly took some advantages of it. Other interviewees participated in the Event directly as art students or artists. Among them, only the fourth interviewee living in the United States is still an independent artist.

Becoming an independent artist also faces a variety of realistic problems as simple as how to make a living. In the past, a lot of students and artists tried to obtain international support and to immigrate to other countries. Unfortunately, only a few of them achieved success. From the third and the fourth interviewees, we can get their art ideas. To some extent, their art achievement cannot be regarded as “advanced” as a result of many reasons. One of the reasons lies in the lack of art education and the difference between the East and the West in their art history. On the other hand, the participants who chose to stay in China might have all given up their art career and pursued development in the commercial world, which was a “fashion” during the late 1980s and the 1990s.

There is one common point among all the interviewees. Typically, because of Chinese people’s natural reticence, they reserved a lot when talking about their personal experience in the Event. They can talk a lot about their concerns for the future of contemporary Chinese art, problems of the government and the system, or their retrospective of the reason of the Event. But once the topic was turned to their personal experience, or their personal thought, feeling and behavior during that Event, it was indeed hard to get their real opinion. They tended to skip the question or briefly conclude their identity as a “deep bystander”. Then who were the real participants? Noticeably, some of them did participate in it actively and passionately. However, with the passage of time, they shirked it away ironically as they were supposed to do it. On the other hand, the reservation happens to almost all Chinese people to different degrees due to their collective unconsciousness. Even if there is no “forbidden zone” in reality, the public consciously thinks that it exists under the strict rule from history. And thus, no one comes out of the zone easily.

There is a lot of academic research discussing the Event itself. Therefore, it is not necessary to describe it again herein. It has been observed that most people do not think the Tiananmen Square Event could have been successful in any way. The students were not unified and there was no certain agreement. Actually, the Event itself was also not about democracy and human rights reported by the Western press. Some critics even mentioned that “if Westerners had not fanned the flames of student protest and if the foreign ‘black hands’ had not tried to destroy Chinese communism and the socialist system, the demonstrations would never have gotten out of hand.³¹” For ordinary residents in China, the Event didn’t influence their lives in an obvious way. After all, though the “Massacre” was undoubtedly terrifying, China avoided any large-scale turmoil and focused on its economy and high-speed development.

However, the interviews have revealed that the Event in fact changed the art environment in China to a large extent, which has been ignored in most research and academic discussions. It will be interesting to explore why the China/Avant-Garde exhibition and the Tiananmen Event occurred in the same year. Before June, 1989, art and culture became freer and people were eager to learn from the West and to make some difference, as all the interviewees mentioned. The early 1980s seemed a “Golden Age” for many young people that were innocent and passionate, spiritual and ideal. The future looked bright because of their contribution. In the art world, the exhibition

³¹ Vogel, Ezra F. “The Tiananmen Tragedy,: May 17–June 4, 1989”. 2011. “The Tiananmen Tragedy,: May 17–June 4, 1989”. In Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China, 616–39. Harvard University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbw2f.27>.

China/Avant-Garde in 1989 held just a few months ago before the Event can be regarded as a watershed for the contemporary Chinese art history. At that time, contemporary Chinese art embraced a lot of western styles and ideas. Artists created their works in various forms since there was no limitation for their creation. However, the Event broke their dreams and ideals. And the Event brought the government an insight about how art and culture can change people's mind, and how leisure cultural policies can stimulate art creation. Unfortunately, from a personal point of view, partly because of the Event, the government merely found the danger of the power of art. After the Event, "art was no longer to be a specialized field with its own autonomous regulation and principles, but as the particular application of centrally established ones."³² As the official ideology objected to modern art, it was difficult for independent artists to survive.

Regarding modern art, it is necessary to talk about another facet. The interviewees who were or are artists have all used ink for their art works. First of all, Chinese-style ink painting, Guo Hua 国画, was indeed caught in a tension between patriotic pride and demands for political relevance, with the big names of the 20th century. If we divide Chinese artists into two types: under the system and out of it, or we classify them into "continuers" and "pioneers", we would find that both groups of Chinese artists mainly make artworks of Ink Art. In 2013, the Metropolitan Museum in New York City held its first large-scale exhibition of contemporary Chinese art, Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China. An interesting phenomena might also be noticed in China. The reason might come from both the West and the East. To the East, since traditional ink

³² Clark, John. 1992. "Official Reactions to Modern Art in China Since the Beijing Massacre". *Pacific Affairs* 65 (3). Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia: 334–52. doi:10.2307/2760067

art is regarded as a high-level form, without the strong self-expression as modern art has, the government welcomes this kind of art and also treats it as a cultural treasure. To the West, ink art looks “Chinese” or “traditional” is worth being treated seriously. This may be good for the international market of Chinese art, but it is harmful to the modern Chinese art history. Apart from Ink Art, no matter in the traditional way or the modern form, it is critical to study other types of Chinese art such as Pop art, Western-style art, or political art. In brief, the Tiananmen Square Event of June 1989 caused the art environment in China to change enormously, making the year of 1989 of significance to study the history of contemporary Chinese art.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the relations between individuals and history, art and politics, and people's own identities through studying a specific impactful political event in China. The 1980s was a prosperous period full of opportunities in China. People were open and innocent without the invasion of commercialism and consumerism. Therefore, the researcher is interested in this age. By researching, interviewing, and writing for this topic, the researcher has learned from more figurative thoughts about how these things relate to each other, especially with the help of those interviewees' own stories, opinions, and struggles in terms of art and living. Politics has indeed changed our lives, and art might be the most vulnerable under the influence of politics and policies.

The most impressive point is the interesting phenomenon between the China/Avant-Garde art exhibition and the Tiananmen Square massacre occurring in the same year. The former represented the spirit of freedom and courage. Particularly, the art exhibition showed advanced cultural and art achievement which happened in China surprisingly under the support of the government, marking a seminal moment in the history of contemporary Chinese art. The latter, on the other hand, implied the control of the government over art and culture; it indicated that China was still a society following the Communist ideology. It seemed that the free air came into the peak and was then strangled. There is an idiom in Chinese that can perfectly describe the phenomenon: wu ji bi fan 物极必反, which means that when things reach an extreme, they can only move in the opposite direction. As for the deep reason, according to the researcher's

assumption and limited resources, it also comes from the inner conflict between two forces in the Party.

Rome was not built in one day - it might be the lesson we have learned from 1989.

There is still a long path for contemporary Chinese art to go. And all the staff working for art in China should make their efforts to improve the environment. Although as some interviewees concerned, the environment of creation is out of date and unfriendly and thus hard to cultivate true artists. With globalization, we now can get information all around the world, which will influence the creativity of Chinese artists, especially younger and emerging artists.

The Tiananmen Square Event still casts a shadow over this and other fields of contemporary Chinese studies, but it seems that the momentum generated in the eighties will carry forward the serious study of modern Chinese art and society. And in spite of the development of China, Chinese artists do not enjoy a prosperous situation as other careers; contemporaneously, the art industry is under attack by not only today's strict censorship, but also the influence generated from the past. There are more topics about Chinese art in the year of 1989 than the political event that need to be discussed. Exploration of the life of the artists who participated in the China/Avant-Garde might be helpful for understanding the swerve before and after 1989 for the developmental sake of modern Chinese art.

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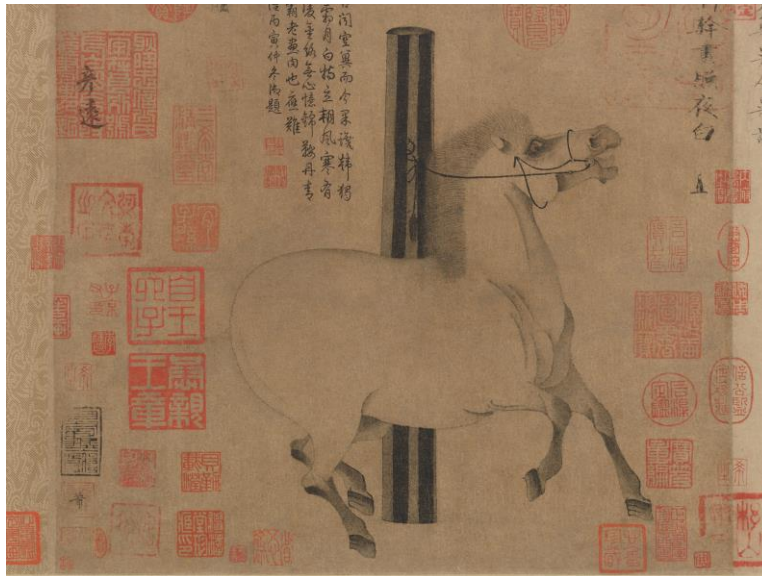
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Traditional Chinese Paintings



Han Gan (Chinese, active ca. 742–756)

Tang dynasty (618–907)

Night-Shining White

<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39901>



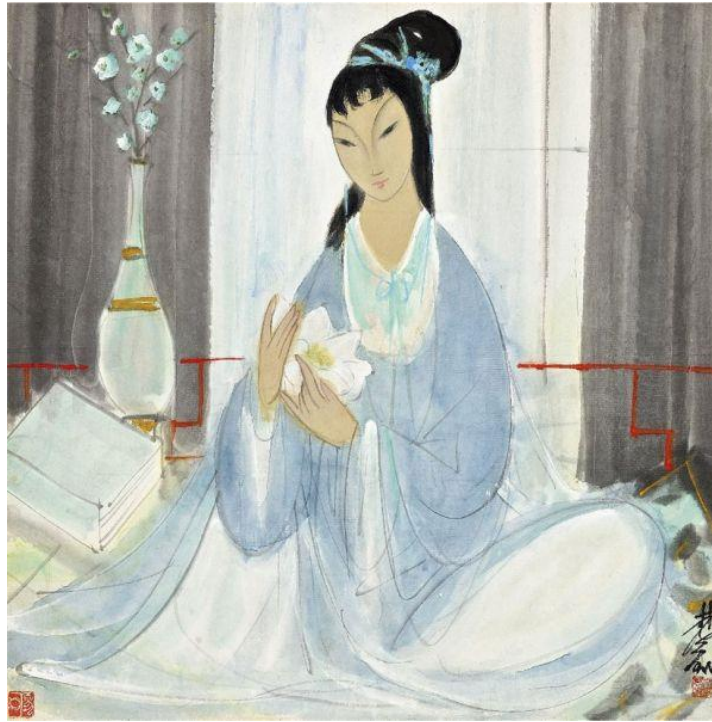
Gong Xian (Chinese, 1619–1689)

Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Ink Landscapes with Poems

<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/36131>

Modern Chinese Art



Lin Fengmian: Lady Holding a Lotus Flower
c. 1940-1950

<http://pictify.saatchigallery.com/154997/lin-fengmian-lady-holding-a-lotus-flower>



Liu Haisu: Clouds and Wonders in Huangshan
1976 126cm X 152cm

<http://www.lhs-arts.org/en#Gallery>



Xu Beihong: Jiang-Biwei-by-a-table
1925

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Xu-Beihong-1925-Painting-Jiang-Biwei-by-a-table.jpg>

China/Avant-Garde Exhibition



<http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/13397>



Xiao Lu, Two Gunshots Fired at the Installation "Dialogue" in the China Avant-Garde Exhibition, Beijing Feb 1989. Performance.

<https://mondaymuseum.wordpress.com/2012/02/27/1989-china-avant-garde-exhibition/>



Huang Yongping, "The History of Chinese Painting" and the "History of Modern Western Art," Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes, 1987, installation, paper pulp, wood, glass.

<https://mondaymuseum.wordpress.com/2012/02/27/1989-china-avant-garde-exhibition/>



Destroying works of art outside the Xiamen Art Museum by the Xiamen Dada group, 1986
<https://mondaymuseum.wordpress.com/2012/02/27/1989-china-avant-garde-exhibition/>